

Wildlife Express!

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Wonderful

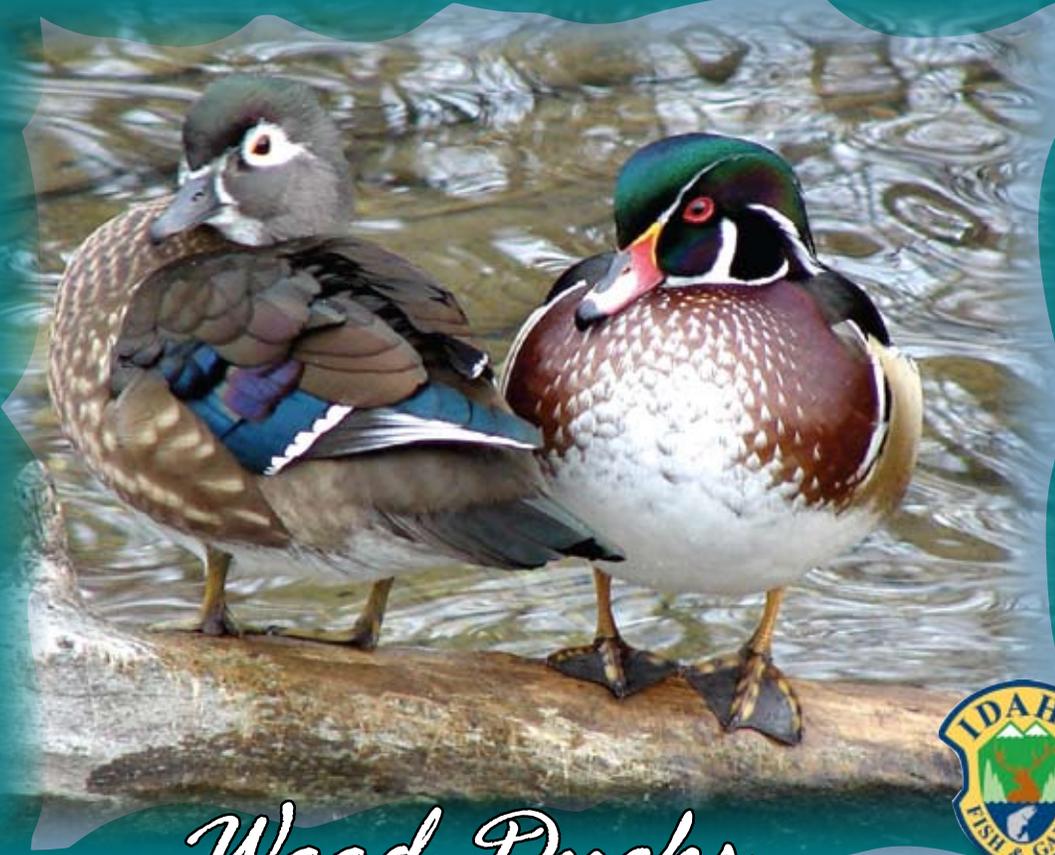


Photo courtesy Frank Lumburg



Wood Ducks

LET'S LOOK AT....



Photo courtesy Frank Lundberg

WOOD DUCKS

The wood duck is Idaho's most beautiful duck. In fact, many people consider it to be the most beautiful duck in the world. With his bold greenish-purple crest, white stripes on his face, red eye and reddish, yellow and black bill, the male wood duck is hard to miss. While the female also has a crest, her feathers are a soft brownish-gray, and she has a large white ring around each of her eyes. You can look for wood ducks on ponds, marshes, creeks and other small bodies of water during most of the year. Many of Idaho's wood ducks are residents. This means that they do not migrate for the winter. Some of the wood ducks that nest in northern Idaho might move into southern Idaho for the winter. They do not make long migrations like other kinds of ducks.

Wood ducks are small to medium-sized ducks. They weigh one to two pounds and are 19 – 21 inches long. Their wingspan is 26 – 29 inches. Wood ducks are found only in North America. They belong to a small group of ducks called "perching" ducks. This comes from their habitat of perching in trees, especially during the breeding season. It is a funny sight to see a duck perched in a tree! Unlike most ducks that nest on the ground or on floating platforms of plants, wood ducks are one of only seven species of ducks that nest in cavities in trees. Both of these habits help give this duck its name.

Wood ducks find mates in late autumn. When spring arrives, the pair looks for a nest site near water. Both parents check out different tree cavities, but the female chooses the nest site. These cavities can be old pileated (PILL-ee-ated) woodpecker nests, places where a broken branch has formed a hole and even nest boxes. The female lines the cavity with down and incubates her 6 – 15 creamy white eggs for about 30 days. All ducklings are precocial (pre-CO-shall). This means that once their down dries, they can leave their nest and feed themselves, usually only a day after hatching. For wood duck ducklings, leaving their nest requires a big first step!

The only way for these ducklings to leave their nest is to jump out. To encourage her ducklings, the mother leaves the nest and calls to them. The ducklings climb out of the nest and jump to the ground or water below. Ducklings have been seen jumping 290 feet without hurting themselves. They can do this because they weigh so little, and their bones are very soft. The ducklings will spend the next 8 – 9 weeks with their mother. While adult wood ducks eat mostly plants like seeds, duckweeds, pondweeds, and acorns, ducklings eat invertebrates like dragonflies, spiders, beetles and aquatic insects. This food gives them the protein they need to grow quickly into Idaho's most beautiful duck.

WATERFOWL



Photo courtesy Bill Heatter IDFG

Wood ducks belong to a family of birds called “waterfowl.” The members of this large family are the ducks, geese and swans. As you might guess from their name, waterfowl live in or near water. They can be found on every continent and many islands. Scientists estimate that there are 154 different species of waterfowl in the world. Here in Idaho you can see 32 different species of waterfowl. This includes 26 species of ducks, four species geese and two species of swans.

Waterfowl come in many sizes. The smallest member of the waterfowl family is the bufflehead. This little duck is as long as a ruler and weighs less than one pound. At the other end of the scale is the trumpeter swan, weighing in at 23 pounds and with a wingspan of up to eight feet. Compare this to our familiar Canada goose that weighs 4 – 9 pounds and has a wingspan that would equal the height of an average fourth grader. No matter how big or small, waterfowl all have some things in common.

All waterfowl have webbed feet. The first three toes are completely webbed while the fourth back toe is not. This webbing gives these birds great paddles for moving around and steering through water. Spending life in water means trying to stay dry and waterfowl have waterproof feathers. The waterproofing ability comes from the structure of the feather itself. The barbs and barbules that make up most of a feather are arranged in such a way that they shed water. This is what allows water to roll off a duck’s back. Most waterfowl also have more feathers than other birds. This helps insulate them from cold water. The record for number of feathers goes to the tundra swan which has over 25,000 feathers on its body! Waterfowl are also very strong fliers. This helps many species travel long distances during migration.

Worldwide, waterfowl populations are doing well, but it was not always this way. Waterfowl were hunted for food and for feathers. Unregulated hunting led to the serious decline of many species including the wood duck. From 1918 - 1941, the United States and Canada banned waterfowl hunting. This protection helped and today most waterfowl species are thriving.



Photo courtesy Frank Lundburg

Canada goose and goslings

CAVITY NESTING

When you hear the word “cavity” you might think of having to take a trip to the dentist. But for wood ducks and many other kinds of animals a cavity is a very important place. For the most part, a cavity is any kind of hole or crevice that an animal can use for shelter. Natural cavities can be found in many places including in trees and under rocks. They are used for raising young, storing food and taking shelter. Sometimes cavities are shared by a number of animals, especially during winter nights. Chickadees, nuthatches or bluebirds will share cavities during the winter. Finding up to 12 bluebirds in a single cavity is common.

When it comes to making a cavity, the woodpeckers are the champions. Once they use the cavity, it becomes an important second home to those animals that cannot excavate their own cavity. Many birds will use old woodpecker nest cavities for their nest site. These include wood duck, chickadee, nuthatch, tree swallow, violet-green swallow, bluebird, screech owl and many others. Mammals such as squirrels and bats will also use old woodpecker nests. Cavities provide safe places for the animals that use them. Most predators will not be able to climb a tree to reach a nest of young birds. In addition, cavities are usually protected from the weather.

When natural cavities are in short supply, many cavity nesters are very creative in finding other kinds of cavities to use. Members of the wren family are well-known for their use of odd nest sites. These tiny songbirds have been found nesting in boots, mailboxes and even a bag of clothespins left hanging on a clothesline. Swallows will nest in cavities under the eaves of houses and garages. Many of these birds will also readily use nest boxes if they are available. In fact, nest boxes played an important role in helping increase the populations of both eastern and mountain bluebirds. Many areas of bluebird habitat lost nesting cavities as the land was cleared of trees. Without the trees, the bluebirds had no where to nest. Putting up nest boxes provided the cavities these birds needed to nest. Now, both of these bluebird species are doing well.

Mountain bluebird



Photo courtesy IDFG

Photo courtesy USFWS



Cinnamon teal

DABBLING DUCKS

Ducks are divided into two basic groups based on the way they feed. These groups include the dabbling ducks and the diving ducks. Over 50 different kinds of dabbling ducks are found worldwide. The name “dabbling” comes from the way these birds feed. They move their bills across the surface of the water to pick up small floating plants and aquatic insects. This method of feeding is referred to as “dabbling.”

Some dabbling ducks also feed by tipping up their tails to reach plants under the water. With their rear ends in the air, these ducks can stretch their necks well below the surface of the water. This behavior is helpful in identifying the kind of duck you are watching. If you see a “butt’s up” duck feeding in a pond you know you are looking at a member of the dabbling duck group.



Mallard

Photo courtesy Frank Lundburg

Dabbling ducks are easily able to walk on land because their legs are placed well underneath their bodies. This allows dabbling ducks to take advantage of food sources that might be growing out of the water. Dabbling ducks that you can see here in Idaho include mallard, wood duck, cinnamon teal, Northern pintail, Northern shoveler, wigeon, and several others.

Photo courtesy USFWS



Common merganser

DIVING DUCKS

The other major group of ducks is the diving ducks. Like the dabbling ducks, this group is also named for the way they feed. Diving ducks dive under the water to find their food. Most species use their feet to propel themselves through the water, but they will also sometimes use their wings to “fly” through the water. Most diving ducks dive no deeper than about 20 feet. They can only hold their breath about a minute.

Diving ducks are often found in large bodies of water such as large rivers, lakes and the ocean. Here they feed on underwater plants, fish, clams, mussels, and shellfish.

Diving ducks are very awkward on land. Their legs are placed far back on their body which makes walking difficult. This also requires them to run across the top of the water before they can fly.

Dabbling ducks are able to fly directly off the water without needing a running start.

Many of the diving ducks that are found here in Idaho can be seen in large groups during winter. These groups are called “rafts” and are often made up of different species. These species include common goldeneye, common merganser, hooded merganser, and ring-necked duck.



Hooded merganser

Photo courtesy IDFG

SNAGS

The nesting cavities needed by wood ducks and other cavity nesting species are often found in dead standing trees, called snags. A tree becomes a snag when a part of the tree dies. Disease, insects, fire, high winds, lightning, and many other things can cause a tree to die. People sometimes think that dead trees are useless, but wildlife would disagree.

The best known use of snags by wildlife is as a nesting site for birds. In Idaho, 52 different kinds of birds nest in snags. Woodpeckers are the most familiar of these birds. Other common snag-nesting species include chickadees, wrens and our own state bird, the mountain bluebird. But did you know that nine of Idaho's owl species nest in snags? Or that six different kinds of ducks nest in cavities in snags? While all these birds are very different, none of them can make a regular cup nest woven out of twigs and grasses. They are completely dependent on cavities for their nest. When snags disappear, so do the nesting sites that these birds need.

Snags are also used by mammals. Twenty-five of Idaho's mammals need snags mostly as places to raise their young. These mammals include not only squirrels and bats but also some unexpected species like weasels and lynx.

Snags are like cafeterias for many animals. The insects that infest dead wood become food for other animals. These animals, in turn, might become food for other animals. The fungi that begin to grow on the snag are food for wildlife too. Snags are important resting sites where animals can shelter from the winter cold or the summer heat. Finally, when the snag falls to the ground and decomposes, it slowly releases its nutrients back to the soil. This feeds young growing trees. Snags are anything but useless.

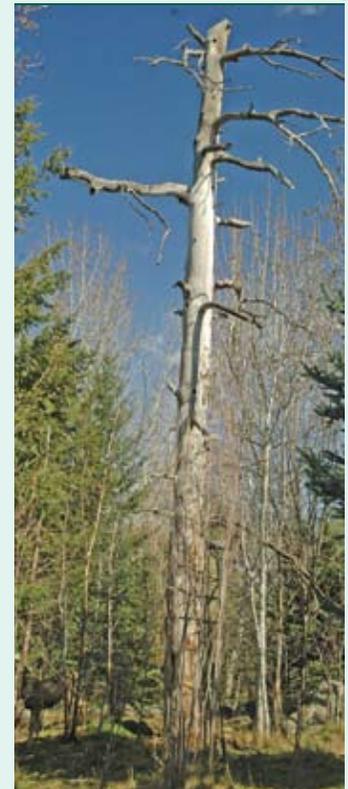


Photo courtesy Niels Nokkentved

LET THEM BE

Spring is a time for renewal. It's a time to get out of the house and explore all the wonders of nature. Walks, bike rides and fishing trips may take us closer to wildlife. You may see baby animals. It's a true sign that spring has arrived.

When you hear people talking about enjoying animals, remember it is especially important that we leave animals alone. Let them do the things they need to do to survive. Getting too close to wild animals might stress them and cause them to die.

As humans, we have an urge to take care of things we think are helpless, especially "cute" animals. If you see a baby animal, don't assume it has been abandoned by its mother. Most of the time, this isn't the case. Mothers often leave their young hidden while they go away to eat. If the mother stayed close to her baby, she could actually draw the attention of a predator. You may have scared the mother away. She will return once "danger" has passed.

If you know that an animal is orphaned because the mother has died, call your local Fish and Game office. They will take the animal to a wildlife rehabilitator. Chances are if you take an animal home, it will die. Caring for a wild animal is not the same as caring for a pet. They need special foods, cages and treatments. Wildlife rehabilitators are specially trained and licensed to care for them.

Wildlife should not be handled, fed, chased or disturbed. If an animal will let you close enough to pick it up, it may be sick. Do not pick up a wild animal – dead or alive. Wild animals are just that – wild! They survive on their own just fine without any help from people. Wild animals are unique and wonderful, view them from a distance and leave wildlife in the wild.

BIRD WATCHING

If you are enjoying reading about wood ducks, you might want to become a bird watcher. Millions of people in the United States enjoy this interesting hobby. Some of them help scientists by taking part in special studies like Project FeederWatch. Others help collect information about bird populations by helping with bird counts like the Breeding Bird Survey or the Christmas Bird Count.

It is easy to watch birds. Just spend some time outside and you are likely to see a bird. Spring is a great time because you can also hear many kinds of bird songs. The male birds sing to set up their territory and attract a mate. If you spend some time in your backyard just listening, you might be amazed at how many different kinds of bird songs you will hear.

Once you find a singing bird, look at its size and shape. Is it one color or several? Do you see anything that stands out like stripes or spots on its chest? What about stripes on its wings? Does it ever land on the ground or does it stay in the trees? What kind of habitat is the bird in? Having a bird identification guide will help you decide what you are seeing. You can check these out of your school or community library. Spend time looking through your guide so you get familiar with it.

One great way to learn about bird watching is to go on a bird walk. Check out your local nature center or park to see if they offer bird walks. Contact your local Audubon Society for a list of their bird walks and programs. Most experienced bird watchers enjoy helping new birders, especially students. In fact many of the best bird watchers started out just like you, by learning about the birds in their own backyard.

MOLT

Feathers are one of the major things that make a bird a bird. They are made of a protein called keratin. You have keratin in your fingernails and hair. In the case of feathers, keratin is formed as the cells in the feathers mature and die. Keratin makes feathers strong and flexible. But eventually, feathers become worn out and they must be replaced. Worn feathers are not as helpful for flying as newer feathers. They also do not provide much insulation. Having new feathers each year is important to a bird's survival. The process of losing old feathers and growing new ones is called "molt."

The first molt a bird has is from its baby down to its juvenile feathers. As the bird becomes an adult, it loses its juvenile feathers and grows adult feathers. Adult birds also molt once or twice each year, usually in the spring or fall when they are not raising young or migrating. Have you ever seen a hawk that has a gap in the flight feathers on its wings? If you have, you have seen a bird that is molting. Next time you see such a bird, look at both wings. When birds lose their flight feathers they usually lose a feather in the same spot on each wing. As one flight feather is lost and a new one grows in, another feather will be lost until all the flight feathers on each wing are new. By losing a few flight feathers at a time, birds are able to fly while they are molting.

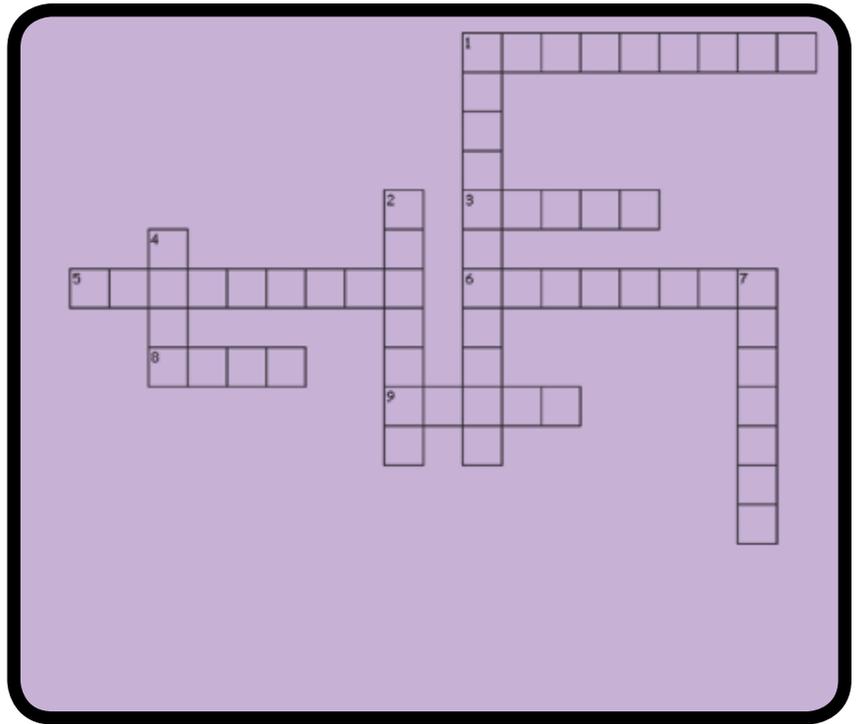
Waterfowl are different. Instead of losing just a few flight feathers at a time like most birds, they lose all their flight feathers at once. And you guessed it: they cannot fly during this time! While this might seem to be a bad idea, it is actually easier for waterfowl to molt this way. They are fairly heavy birds with short wings compared to their body size. The loss of a few flight feathers would make it almost impossible for them to fly, and it would take longer. Waterfowl would be at a disadvantage for a longer time. By losing all their flight feathers at once, they are done molting in about a month, just in time for the fall migration.



Photo courtesy Niels Nokkentved

Words

Cavities
Legs
Molting
North
Perch
Precocial
Snag
Surface
Waterfowl
Woodpeckers



Wonderful Wood Ducks

Across

1. Ducks belong in the _____ family.
3. Wood ducks got their name because they like to _____ in trees.
5. Wood duck ducklings are _____; they can feed themselves when they are only one day old.
6. Tree _____ are where wood ducks lay their eggs.
8. A dead tree is called a _____.
9. Wood ducks are found only in _____ America.

Down

1. Most cavities in trees are made by _____.
2. When birds replace their worn out feathers, it is called _____.
4. Diving ducks' _____ are placed far back on their bodies.
7. Dabbling ducks feed on or near the _____ of the water.

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU !

If you have a letter, poem or question for *Wildlife Express*, it may be included in a future issue!
Send it to the address printed above!

